

Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast **In conversation with Helen Beetham**

Hello and welcome to Episode 3 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name's Ben Steel and I'll be your host for this episode. And today's episode, we have a conversation between Suzanne Hardy, who works in the learning and teaching development service here at Newcastle University and education consultant, writer, researcher and commentator Helen Beetham. Helen was part of our Art of the Possible Week recently. And in this episode, Helen and Suzanne sit down for a albeit zoom conversation about her session, creating digital online activities, digital learning, new technologies and safe spaces within a digital world. So enjoy.

Thank you for coming. Helen, it's really nice to see you as always. Lovely to have a chat with Helen Beetham. It's always loved to talk to you, Suzanne, and I'm really excited about the learning and teaching conference coming up. Yeah, that's well learning teaching conference takes place in March. This is an extra event that we're doing which we've called the art of the possible. And it's the second one we've done. We did one about two years ago, which had an accessibility theme and was really, really well attended. And the materials have been really popular since. So we're hoping that this this one, which is all about kind of share and good practice through the pandemic and blended learning and things that work with people and what they want to take forward.

We're really hoping that that's going to be just as useful as well as we move into supporting more blended learning on campus and kind of moving people from the fully online experience that they've had during the pandemic back to the kind of direction that the university was already taken in its education strategy to have much more use of technology enhanced learning in campus based courses.

And, of course, the pandemic's, done us kind of a favour in some ways in that things like if we'd rolled out video conferencing.

On campus without the pandemic, we probably would have had to put in place a lot of training and a lot of support, and because of the way that we move to fully online remote learn and rather than online learning remote teaching, I would see then that people just had to kind of learn it, which is stressful, but in the long run, probably being quite useful.

But I was interested in because you very kindly said that you do some workshops with some people from Newcastle on design and online activities for university learning.

And I thought it might be interesting for the podcast just to have a chat with you about how that came about and kind of the challenges with engagement and inclusion.

When people are teaching online, they are different to what they've been used to with Face-To-Face teaching. Well, a bit like you just said about the direction of travel being there any way, Suzanne.

You know, my interest in online in designing online activities, as you know, is an old one.

It's been around for a long time. And I find activities a really useful focus for talking with academic staff.

I don't think it's the only one. And we can maybe go on to talk about some of the interviews I'm doing at the moment.

But certainly when you talk to expert academic staff who are experts at kind of making digital work in their subject area, which is what excites me, then they talk about a lot of things other than activity design.

But activity design is a really practical way of getting quite deep into a conversation about what needs to happen within subject specialist pedagogies, within subject specialist kind of practices to make to make some of the aspirations we have very real and very deliverable.

So I find activity designed just a kind of a really useful meeting point of some of the specialism that you have that perhaps I have that people have been judicial education have with the specialism that academic teachers have of what the core issues are, what the threshold concepts are, what they need their students to be able to do, and what kind of work or what kind of future aspirations their students have as well, and how they can kind of realise that alongside the curriculum, with forms of digital practice, that might be useful.

So, again, I don't I don't think activities design is the only way to have those conversations or the only way to bring useful pedagogic ideas to life in the curriculum.

But I do think it's for me, it's been a productive one. Does that answer your question?

I think it does, and it kind of relates to some of the questions that we will get in coming through in LTDS through school liaisons who've been working with individual schools and academics on programs, and we were getting quite a lot of questions around how we how do we get students to engage with the online activities that we've put together?

How do we get them to engage with the online content?

So that kind of designing for engagement and activity design is definitely a great conversation starting point.

And we did produce a few resources around that and we've developed a couple of webinars around design and for engagement.

So I think the workshop that you're doing will take that, hopefully it to another level of detail and really pleased that that we've reached the maximum capacity on it.

So we're really also very pleased that you've agreed that we can record that and make it available to staff afterwards, because I think there will be some really rich conversations hopefully that come out of it.

Can you just talk a little bit about how this fits in with I know that you're doing some research in this area at the minute, Helen, and it be really interesting just to have a think about what that research is and how it relates to the workshop and hopefully what this will give you in your research area.

Well, it's nice to have that opportunity Suzanne. I just want to go back briefly, though, to what you said about engagement, because I agree that we've learned all kinds of kind of generic.

I won't say tricks of the trade, but certainly there are lots of ways of making online more engaging. I know your team are really expert. I guess I'm kind of starting from the opposite end of that in a way, which is what is intrinsically meaningful and engaging in the curriculum that can be effectively delivered using digital means. So what are the things that students think they have signed up to learn or that academics know they need to learn to be effective engineers, you know, biochemists, whatever it might be.

And so that engagement, in a sense, is kind of intrinsic to the discussion about what should my students be doing?

What are the right tools and media for them to be doing it in? And what are the right groupings, you know?

Do they do it, too, alone in pair groups?

Is there a kind of a kind of move between, you know, solo and group and large group work that's going to help with that actual activity take place?

So my research I've been talking to academics who are interested in how thinking happens in their subject and are interested in how digital platforms and media and data are changing that and a bit like the activity conversation, I find it really exciting and deep conversation to have with academics about what they believe.

You know, what they believe thinking is what they what they understand, how they understand their subject area. And if I could use some grand words, you know, it connects the epistemology. So how knowledge is structured in their subject with their pedagogy, how they know to help students reproduce that those kind of knowledge practices. And in the interviews, I found that activity design is one thing that academics talk about. And my starting point for the research was that that would be the main focus. And so if they do talk about concepts, they talk about, you know, kind of varieties of activity. So we could use different typologies like Laullard's like blooms.

You know, I have one of my own that's come out of these interviews and we can typologies activities. And that's really helpful as in and of itself, because it means you can share across subject areas in a really useful way. But they talk about a number of other things as well that I really hope can come into this workshop a bit.

So they talk about what I call relational spaces, which is not just what students are doing, but how they're experiencing the relationships in that space. And that's one of the things that's most challenging when we go online to create the sense of both safety and challenge of belonging, but also independence that you can create in all kinds of ways in Face-To-Face environments, that in an online environment you have to really structure into the design and really think ahead about how to do that.

And they talk about something that I call kind of conceptual extension. But what they what I mean by that really is quite simple things like how you ask questions, how you ask questions in a session that probe more deeply or encourage students to ask questions of their own.

And again, that's not always explicit in how you design activity. It's more a sort of micro level of your pedagogic practice.

You know, it's something that good teachers just do on the fly. They do very instinctively after a while. But they know that they know why they do it. They have a really deep sense from their professional pedagogy of why they're doing it that way. And that's another thing that has really come out for me as being something that has to be more explicitly designed into the online environment.

You have to think ahead, don't you, about what pairs am I going to put people into? What groups? And if I've got a question for them, I'm going to ask it verbally or I'm going to put it on the screen. Are they going to respond in the chat window? Are they going to draw something? So some of those features of a really expert pedagogy that might be more instinctive Face-To-Face has to be more explicit online. So it's been exciting in my research to have those conversations. But I also think it creates all sorts of opportunities to really share those pedagogies more explicitly because we're having to do them in this more explicit and manifest environment.

Yeah, I think that's really interesting. And one of the one of the really exciting bits of my job. And the thing that kind of makes me want to get out of bed in the morning is having those conversations with colleagues who are specialists in their disciplines and know about the discipline pedagogy in their own disciplines.

But having that conversation to kind of help them reflect on what's probably become quite tacit in it, they just do it in the in the in the face to face the environment. And so helping and people sort of have those conversations around deconstructing what happens in a seminar, deconstructing what happens in a lecture, deconstructing what happens in the learning activities that they've designed for Face-To-Face delivery to then as you say.

Reconceptualise that full online learn and where you have to plan things a lot, a lot more carefully. And that I find those conversations really stimulating. And we're not discipline experts in LTDS, none of us are discipline experts, but hopefully we can help people reflect on what they do really well in the face to face environment and help them reconceptualise what will work for them in the online environment. Because I think one of the questions that we get asked most often is what's the best way to teach online? And there isn't a best way, just as there isn't a best way to teach face to face.

It's very much dependent on the individual academic discipline expectations, because I think there are expectations across disciplines that it that you'll teach in particular ways and use particular methods and use particular kinds of assessment. And we can't know that yet. That's not up to us to challenge or dictate what happens.

With that in LTDS, the Learning and teaching development service is about helping people reflect on and capture effective practice and improve on that kind of higher quality

improvement cycle idea. So yeah, I think the research that you do and will be really valuable, I'm intrigued by the idea that you've come up with a new a new taxonomy.

Well, I wouldn't want to push that one too much, but what I would say, responding to what you just said, Suzanne, is that you're right. Those conversations are just such a privilege. It's so fascinating to have them and to watch somebody use the opportunity of technology to deconstruct and more deeply understand for themselves what it is they do when they're doing it. But I also think we shouldn't take away from the fact that we can reconstruct some of those practices in new and exciting ways. So we always say it's not about the technology.

But actually, I'm really interested to play with we'll be playing with in a workshop with some of these new design based environments like Miro, like Padlet and Trello, where you can actually spatially and visually map out aspects of pedagogy. And I think academics who to do that you're interested in they teaching often really fascinated to find that they can manifest certain things in those spatial environments, that they're really different, how they might have done it, Face-To-Face. And actually also because those environments and can persist from a live online session to an independent study session or a group study session. And then there's opportunities that perhaps aren't quite there. And you'll in the in the in the usual classroom environment. And I've also been really and I know you like sort of, some of the Avatar based environments as well.

They can be really simple setups, something like Gather Town. And again, it's not necessarily reproducing something. It's creating something completely new that built in elements of what it is you're trying to achieve or how, you know, knowledge is structured in your discipline or, you know, how students think, you know, maybe they think visually in certain for certain concepts, you need to get across. And reconstructing that with the technology in a sort of new way. In the technologies you know, it gives those opportunities, doesn't it? I know we say it's not about the technology, but sometimes it can be and that can be quite fun. And sometimes the technology gets people excited about what they could potentially do with it with their teaching and that's always really exciting to say.

The other thing that kind of really gets me out of bed in the morning is when you see when you see that light bulb moment and people get really excited about that discipline and kind of what got them into being an academic and the discipline in the first place. I love to see that fire behind people's eyes where they get really excited about their subject matter, that they that they that they're really passionate about and the kind of trying to capture that, to instil that in students and get students excited about the discipline areas, which is why they came to university in the first place, because they were interested in those discipline areas.

So the combination of that and what people have done in the last 15 months, because people have tried new things, they've found things that work really well for them. And so finding ways to share that and encouraging people to make use of that in the face to face environment and maybe reconsider some of the ways that they're delivering curricula in a present in person format to incorporate those things that have worked really, really well and that students have liked and that have helped light those fires. This is a really brilliant subject. And I want to I want to I never want to study anything else.

And I think, I mean, again, we'd have that great privilege of having been there at some of those moments, don't we? And using technology to elicit them or the using technical

approaches and ideas to elicit them. But what I love about what I have, you know, must do is to make those conversations also really scholarly, because I think our academics, they are they are scholars. Their research led. They are thoughtful people. And, you know, they want to have a conversation about their teaching, which is equally as scholarly and intense and thoughtful as the conversations they have about their research and I think when you get the opportunity to have that face to face encounter with academics around their teaching, really you can make it much more scholarly and involved and thoughtful. And it's really such a caricature that we come along with our little solutions and we try to plug them in.

You know, we actually want to have those that scholarly engagement. And so, yes, one of the things I will be doing is trying to encourage some of your academics to come and speak to me about their about their pedagogic and epistemological practice. And I hope that that I will encourage them through both scholarship and a bit of fun to do that, because and for me at the minute, that's my that's what I get up in the morning to do is to have those fascinating research based conversations and hopefully to share them more widely through things like workshops. You know what? This research to be very practical, very practitioner focused as well as, of course, you and I have our own research interests and our own scholarship that we're also trying to pursue.

Yeah, and I think I think those conversations will happen. We've got lots of really interesting, thoughtful, thoughtful people here up at Newcastle. And it's always, as you say, such a privilege to have those scholarly conversations with people about them, about their practice and what they found has worked and sharing it because, you know, when you find something that works, you kind of want to tell people about it.

So finding ways to do that, I think will be will be really interesting. And so, yeah, the workshops I think will be great. It's a start. Sadly we've had more demand than we can accommodate. But hopefully the recordings and possibly the chance to get involved with some deeper conversations with you in some research interviews might be attractive to some people as well.

Well, let's hope so. I mean, I think the other thing that makes it scholarly is, is asking people about how digital technique, digital data is changing research methods in a subject area and is changing what it means to be in their discipline and also changing the kind of world that their graduate students are moving out into.

Because all those conversations people think about all the time but don't necessarily immediately relate to teaching. I think especially the last year, 15 months, you know, so much has been flying by the seat of our pants, hasn't it?

I mean, I know I've been delivering online in ways I haven't done before and it's been stressful and it's been just make it work. Just make it happen. But what I found in the last few months is that actually there's been that slight coming off of the gas where people want to have that reflective time. They want to consolidate. They want to think. And so having these much richer conversations about, you know, scholarship going forward, about the world that's changing, about, you know, what was actually mean to equip our students to thrive in the post pandemic post digital world they're going into I think there is finally a space, an appetite, exhausted, though we all are to have those conversations. And so, yeah, I think it's a really rich moment.

Yeah, I would totally agree. And one of the things that we've talked about previously had been in the prep for the workshops and for this podcast was about the idea of creating safe digital spaces and safe physical spaces for students to start to think critically and to have the confidence to question and I wonder whether you might just and just talk a little bit more about that.

Oh, absolutely, and that comes back absolutely to the thing I called relational spaces. So when you talk to academics that how they help students become more critical and more questioning, then although they do have a repertoire of activities that they know from their teaching experience of the ones that help students step up to that, which might be, you know, doing something that's project based, that's very authentic, that's addressing an authentic challenge in their subject.

Or it might be kind of annotating and editing, something that might have a public life. They have those activities at their sleeve. But you have to get they also you have to get that relationship of trust and safety right before students and particularly some students are prepared to be critical because thinking deeply means abandoning old ways of thinking.

And that's always difficult. You know, when which one was stressed, were more fearful, were more working in ways that are unfamiliar, like online, when we're dealing with a global crisis, we don't naturally feel ready to step out of any kind of comfort zone and to be challenged.

And I think in some ways that's been the hardest thing that teachers have found over the over the last period. Obviously, there's been all the technical difficulty of learning and teaching and working and relating through a screen through in different ways. But, you know, what they left with is a sense of, you know, what's precious about Face-To-Face relational spaces and how to recreate some of that sense of belonging and safety and trust in an online space which takes more work, which does mean attending to the different needs of different students, some of whom, you know, we'll be very happy to express themselves and maybe happier to express themselves in online spaces. Others of whom will go quiet will keep their cameras off. We can learn how to do relating better through a screen and we can learn to value better what Face-To-Face gives to us. Relationally, I think. Is that what is that kind of thing you were thinking of?

Yeah, definitely. And also I think for me it's about use using the affordances of online for what online good at and use in presently person or Face-To-Face experiences for what they're good at. And that probably I would imagine has shifted some of the thinking for people over the last 15 months or so as to what actually, how can we get the best out of the Face-To-Face time that we have present in person with students in a room together or outside together that is different. And how can we get the best out of that? How can we distil the essence of what is valuable about face to face so that we can use online for what it's really good at? And there are affordances of online and digital spaces that that you can't do Face-To-Face. And we should we should be exploiting those as well. I think.

But I'm also excited to think that some of the things we've done online might actually mean we rethink some of the face to face as well, because, you know, I mean, I don't want to dismiss the great genuine grief that teachers and students have felt at missing each other in those Face-To-Face spaces. I mean, it's real and it's got to be allowed into the room to

breathe that sense of loss. But I also think there's been a rethinking about the lecture, particularly, you know, in terms of how information through lecturing is conveyed and how that can be done in different ways, in different slices of time. Was to be fifty five minutes, you know, with different kinds of interaction going on with them. I think using things like design based environments, design broad collaborative design boards, boards, avatar based environments does give a new kind of excitement thinking about what's possible in different Face-To-Face spaces. You know, I've seen role play done a lot really successfully online and teachers, you know, committing to bring that into some of the Face-To-Face work they do just because online you sometimes have to be so clear, don't you, about roles and rules and structures of participation, and sometimes that's actually really helpful to students who find out by Face-To-Face spaces where those rules are not made explicit. Quite difficult. So I do think that we'll be taking a lot back into the Face-To-Face environment.

Think that's also something about re-evaluating the those liminal spaces, those transient spaces, the spaces where conversations happen, kind of, you know, water cooler moments, whatever you want to call them. But those chance encounters or, you know, the five minutes at the end of the lecture where students will come down and ask a question face to face, it might not have asked in a group situation.

The chance meeting in the corridor where somebody might ask a question about an assignment they didn't understand or a particular concept that they feel comfortable doing in those transient liminal spaces recreating those online is incredibly difficult.

And so I totally get what you said earlier about helping students feel confident to ask questions.

And that's an area that I'm really interested in, is how we re-evaluate the value of the of the non timetabled those chance encounters and which is really difficult to recreate.

But we can create spaces where hopefully we can encourage confidence, we can encourage critical analysis, where we can encourage question making, etc..

Yeah, absolutely, I can't count how many of the interviewees I've done have mentioned the five minutes at the end of the lecture. That's the thing. One of the things that they miss, the students that didn't feel they want to make a fool of themselves or that just prefer to have that more informal contact. And even if they know it's not just about getting the question answered, but feeling that the lecture is there for you. You know, I think all of that is really, really valuable. And we can't reproduce some of the subliminal messages that we pick up face to face, it just can't be done.

But what we can do is notice that we need to check in a lot. And for some students, some students don't pick up those little email cues, even when we're face to face, you know, so from the view of respect, neurodiversity, some of these habits of really explicitly checking in.

How was that active? Some of that, I think is going to be really useful for us all to think about our practice. Brilliant. Thank you so much, Helen. That was absolutely fantastic.

And there we have it. Thank you to Suzanne and Helen for that great conversation. We hope you enjoyed it. Please feel free to get in touch with us. At the usual e-mail address. And remember to like and subscribe this podcasts and tell anyone else who might be interested.